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Patronage: The Renaissance and Today

Thomas E. Adams
Columbus State University, adams_thomas1@columbusstate.edu

PATRONAGE: THE RENAISSANCE AND TODAY

Thomas Edward Adams

Patronage: The Renaissance and Today
by
Thomas E. Adams

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Thesis Advisor _A. Martin_ Date _5/8/14_
Dr. Andrée Martin

Committee Member _____ Date _5/12/14_
Dr. Bradley Palmer

Honors Committee Member _Susan Tomkiewicz_ Date _5/8/14_
Dr. Susan Tomkiewicz

Honors Program Director _Cindy Ticknor_ Date _5/8/14_
Dr. Cindy Ticknor

Patronage, as it will be discussed in this context, is the "money and support…given to an artist, organization, etc." (Merriam-Webster.com). The word itself comes from "*patronus*" in the Latin language, meaning "defender, protector...advocate" (Harper, Online Etymology). The concept of patronage existed long before the Renaissance (14th - 17th centuries), but did not come into the forefront in terms of artistic support until the 1300s. There is no specific, definite date to the start of patronage. In fact, it could be said that a hired person working to complete a singular product is being patronized, meaning that this occurred much earlier than the era known as the Renaissance. Historian Mario Biagioli writes that "Cicero thought that the origins of Roman *clientela* were so ancient that it must have been brought to Rome by Romulus himself" (15), a hyperbolic statement used to get the point across that patronage and the system it thrived in had been around long before the aristocrats of the more modern world. During this time of transition, patronage underwent many changes, generally in terms of how the participants related as well as how patronage was used.

The importance of the patronage system in the arts can be a tricky concept to describe due to the circularity involved in the relationship between the patron and the client. To explain, artists needed to make products worthy of the attention of patrons, but needed patrons in order to make the products proving them worthy of the attention from a patron. Once the system got started, it would make sense that it would be self-sustaining, at least for artists already in this cycle. The support of an artist who has completed products before becoming involved in the patronage system is an important concept for the cycle of the modern age of patronage.

The Renaissance is the era most well-known for the quantity as well as quality of the patronage used during it, but even the following time-periods through to the modern era, have

had a hand in the development of the patronage system. It could be said that the patronage

system has changed from the Renaissance through to the modern world, evolving into the

multiple forms it is in today.

    A reasonable question to ask in terms of the motivation behind the patronage system is:

what would an artist or even the patron have to gain from entering into this situation? Artists

stood to gain notability in the creative realm for being skilled enough to be hired by a patron, and

patrons would gain credibility as a person rich enough, important enough, and influential enough

to warrant patronizing an artist to personally make them a work of art. A patron, with enough

wealth at their disposal, could possibly hire more than one artist; proving that they are of

"substantial wealth and [have an] interest in the community" (Rice University, History of

Patronage).

    For the artists, their work would aid the standing of their patrons and in turn raise their

own position in the artistic community. There then would be a chance that they would be hired

by an even higher-ranked patron who would, in turn, make them even more artistically

marketable. Some artists, Michelangelo for example, would be elevated to the point where the

highest in the land would hire them. At this point in Europe, that person was the pope in Rome.

Michelangelo's status rose "to a level of divinity among Florentine artists" (Rice University,

History of Patronage), another overly-dramatic but effective way of saying that he was very good

at taking advantage of the system he worked within in order to get to the highest position he

could at that time. Regardless, his works of art produced under Pope Julius II (1443-1513),

including the Sistine Chapel's ceiling fresco and the *Pietà* (a sculpture featuring the Virgin Mary

and the deceased Jesus), are still major tourist attractions today. This speaks to the permanence art created during this period maintained.

Lesser known is the inclusion of fields outside of the arts in the patronage system. Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) is possibly the most notable of all of these cases. Regarded as one of the creators of calculus, his interests spanned across many disciplines of science as well, not least of which was astronomy. Notable patrons supporting him included Grand Duke of Tuscany Cosimo II de' Medici (1590-1621). "Medici" is a surname that is littered across patronage's long history, with a concentration in Florence during Renaissance. At this point, the Medici had near a century of ruling over Florence, and is key to understanding the development of the patronage system.

The actual way in which the patronage system worked was an odd mixture of formal and informal function. It is unknown how patrons would get in touch with the artists as an overture to their intentions of hiring them, but there are records of contracts describing the terms to which a piece of art would be completed. During this era, art would often be centered around secular subject matters, so there was much more discussion of how these subjects would be integrated into the works.

In a correspondence between painter Pietro Perugino (c. 1446-1523) and his patron Isabella d'Este the Marchesa of Mantua (1474-1539), Isabella describes how Perugino should complete a painting that would later be titled *The Combat of Love and Chastity*. The work depicts a dramatic scene featuring many figures from Greek and Roman mythology. The letter from d'Este describes in great detail, down to the trees' species and locations, what he should paint for her in the final product. At the end of the letter, she writes that she had sent him "all

these details in a small drawing, so that with both the written description and the drawing you will be able to consider my wishes in this matter" (Hope 294). This shows that she had some skill at drawing, but chose to hire an outside artist to complete the work. Her specificity in the instructions may be due to this, but it may simply be that d'Este knew precisely what she wanted in a project.

A patron less concerned with the work itself and more interested in the artist was Annibal Caro (1507-1566), an Italian poet. He commissioned famed artist Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) to make a work featuring two people, preferably nude and characters from mythology (Adonis and Aphrodite). Beyond this, he makes suggestions and declinations of what he would not like, but leaves a very large window for Vasari, saying "I am satisfied to leave the choice to you" (Hope 303). This is an interesting occurrence, especially when compared to d'Este and her laundry list of requests. This could be due to him being an accomplished artist in his own right, something he pointed out in the letter itself, comparing their respective fields of poetry and painting (Vasari was actually also a poet). His detachment from the subject of the piece in opposition to the work itself is brought up in his opening statement. Caro wrote:

> It is my desire to possess a notable work of your hand both for the sake of your
> reputation and for my satisfaction; because I want to be able to show it to certain people
> who know you better as a quick painter than as an excellent one. . . . as to the
> invention of the subject matter, I also leave this to you. . . . (Hope 302)

Saying that some know him as a fast painter instead of being skilled is not an insult toward Vasari's skill. Really, it is most likely a mere idiosyncrasy to his style for which he became known, and Caro wished to be able to display a work featuring this. The "sake" of his reputation

is not for pity of Vasari either; Caro just wished to help out a colleague, as a person would today

by giving a friend a job instead of a stranger. The Medici would also be known for choosing

artists repeatedly for their support, for a wide range of projects.

   As previously mentioned, it may be impossible to pinpoint when patronage was created.

However, it is reasonable to say that it gained the most popularity in the era known as the

Renaissance. It is also reasonable to state that Florence was one of the guidepost cities in Italy

during this time. An interesting factor to consider for the development of patronage is that the

Renaissance is known for a rekindling of Humanism in the arts.

   Previously, in the Middle Ages (5th - 15th centuries), art the kind of realism seen in

ancient Roman and Greek works. Many factors contributed to this, chief among them the

suppression of Humanist culture by the church, resulting in the loss of many techniques for

nearly a thousand years. Humanism is "any system or mode of thought or action in which

human interests, values, and dignity predominate" (Merriam-Webster.com). The vast majority of

statues and drawings from Ancient Rome featuring humans are very realistic (Fig. 1) and lifelike.

Compare the statue of Caesar Augustus to a statue (Fig. 2) created by an unknown artist in the

1st century, in which the human form is not realistic. It is disproportionate and more meant to

convey the tone of the piece rather than being true to the human body. Now take, for example, a

piece called "David" by Michelangelo, completed in 1504 (Fig. 3). The comparison to the

ancient Roman statue of Caesar Augustus is striking, the similarities are astounding. If there

were no context given, one would probably be tempted to say the Roman and Renaissance statue

were made at around the same. The credit for the recovery of the techniques in the creation of

this art and the subsequent return to this style of art can be given over to the return of Humanism

to the arts.

Humanism aided in the development of patronage due to the fact that patronage can be

viewed as a community builder. The support of a culture could have been an interest that patrons

held as they were choosing the artists and projects they would sponsor. As they hired more and

more clients, they would be viewed greater in the hierarchy of patrons seen as interested in their

community. For Renaissance-era Florence, few could be so seen as interested in this topic as the

Medici proved to be over their long lineage.

Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464) was the first Medici leader of Florence, and would be the

genesis to the family's tradition of patronage in the community. Cosimo contributed to the

artistic culture of Florence quite heavily throughout his tenure as the head of the Medici family.

This allowed him to wield "his influence over Florentine society" (Gilbert 3) in a much larger

amount as opposed to what he would have been able to achieve without it.

One such project was for the sculpting of the statue of St. Matthew for the *Orsanmichele*

church (Kitchen Garden of Saint Michael) in Florence. This church features several statues

depicting saints and other liturgical figures, each one patronized by one of the guilds of artisans

and merchants based in and around the city. This specific statue was funded by the *Arte del*

Cambio, or banking clan, which was headed up by Cosimo de' Medici at this point in time.

Because of this meeting of several guilds for such special works, the guilds were interested in

bringing out the best artists for their personally funded statues. Artists including Donatello,

Lorenzo Ghiberti, Niccolò di Lamberti, and Andrea del Verrochio were called to complete this

task. These were the most prolific artists at this time (1414-1420s), but only Ghiberti was hired

to make more than one for more than one guild. In fact, he ended up creating three statues for

the banking, wool, and Calimalan merchant guilds.

The official contract for the banking clan's hiring of Ghiberti is quite specific in not only

how the statue should be made but also in what way it should be delivered to the church

(Chambers 43). They did, however, give him essentially free reign in terms of the expense of the

material (bronze) he should use. There also exists a stipulation in the contract that Ghiberti

should not ask for "the same sum he had as salary from the Guild of Merchants...nor anything

paid by anyone else" (Chambers 44). By requiring him to be paid less by the other guilds,

Cosimo predetermined that the statue of St. Matthew would be the highest in quality of the three

statues Ghiberti would produce for the Orsanmichele. This not only speaks to the specific

pursuit of dominating the other guilds, but also highlights Cosimo's interest in cultivating

societal growth and sparing no expense to do so.

Another pursuit in societal growth led by Cosimo was the construction of Florence's first

library, located at San Marco monastery. His interest in Humanitarian growth was most likely

the cause of this and "spent lavish sums" (Gilbert 4) to obtain reading materials for, in order to

make it Europe's largest in this period. The Medici would be known across the land for their

cultural interests, oftentimes tied to the church, with whom they had a deep connection.

The Medici were at the center of literally the largest project completed in Florence during

the Renaissance. The family was a part of all major dealings in the city, including church

business. As they gained power, they decided to take on an issue that had been a pall on

Florence for a hundred years. In those days, the importance of a city was judged by the state of

the Duomo, the largest church contained within it, Florence's Duomo named Santa Maria del

Fiore. Interestingly, the cathedral was larger than St. Peter's Basilica, the official church of

Rome. The Duomo's construction began in 1296 under Arnolfo di Cambio (1240-1300), but

remained incomplete until 1420, when construction restarted and the dome was the sole building

done for the cathedral until its completion in 1434. For one-hundred years the church stood,

usable but incomplete. As part of their duty to the city, the Medici headed by Cosimo de' Medici

at this point, made this project a priority for the edification of the city. This task was daunting,

however, as its completion would mean constructing the largest dome in the world. An architect

of great merit had to be found in order to do this.

The Medici found such an architect in Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446), an artist who's

hometown was none other than Florence. He was brought up as a sculptor as well as a gold

metallurgist. His first foray into the artistic world was his entrance into a competition designed

to discover the architect for the creation of the San Giovanni Baptistry doors in the basilica Santa

Maria del Fiore. The commission would be to create very ornate bronze doors to the Baptistry.

Unfortunately for Brunelleschi, he did not succeed in the reception of the job. The honor instead

went to Lorenzo Ghiberti, Brunelleschi's goldsmith rival. Ghiberti would, in fact, go on to

construct two pairs of doors, one in bronze and the other in gold (Wackernagel 25). The patrons

from within the church, the *Operaii*, were obviously pleased with Ghiberti's work and were

willing to commission his work again.

Brunelleschi and Ghiberti came together again to face each other in another competition,

this time for the reception of this position to build the world's largest dome. Interestingly, the

Santa Maria del Fiore would be larger than the official church of Rome, Saint Peter's Basilica,

upon its completion. The competition centered around providing a model or a proof of design

concept in order to win the job. The exact parameters also demanded that those submitting also provide proofs for the design of the materials needed to complete the work (Chambers 39). The official proclamation of the project reads that whoever wishes to submit a plan "will be paid 200 ducats...even if his work should not be accepted" (40).

Clearly, the *Operaii* (church workers) proctoring the competition were interested in finding the very best for the job, hoping to draw them out with promise of payment whether or not they eventually won or not. In fact, the completion of the dome would cement the cathedral as the crowning achievement of Florence. The cathedral is the object a city had to offer that the "spotlight [fell] upon" (Turner 70) for other cities to observe. The people sponsoring the competition were also obviously very aware of this, and in turn affluent enough to be capable of handing out a potentially large sum for all of the submissions they might have eventually received.

The end of the competition came with two winners, Brunelleschi and Ghiberti. The Wool Guild's (*Arte della Lana*) resolution to assign them the job awarded Brunelleschi with 100 florins for each year of work and Ghiberti with 30 florins per month. The resolution also stipulates certain behaviors and codes of conduct the two men were expected to uphold whilst working with the other, specifically that "the said Filippo and Lorenzo shall be obliged to provide...and perform all else...fitting for the good honour and use" of materials used to construct the cupola (dome) as well as the church itself (Chambers 41). This was used to deter one from sabotaging the work or damaging the church during construction. The contract demands that Ghiberti spend at least an hour each work day supervising the work on the church, while Ghiberti had to be there full-time whenever there was work done. Clearly, Brunelleschi was given the more important

position of the two. This is evidenced by the fact that Ghiberti quit his part of the commission

and the project in 1425, five years after work had begun. The reasons of his resignation are not

known, and most likely never will be. In any case, the Duomo was completed in 1434 and the

largest dome in the world was standing on its own. Brunelleschi died only a few years later,

leaving many great commissioned works behind that are still in large display today.

The Renaissance was the time of many great acts of patronage, many of which occurred

in the city of Florence alone. There would be, of course, other places in the 17th and 18th

centuries where patronage would become prevalent in the world of music. Composers in

Austria, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart for example, would be patronized by Habsburg ruler King

Joseph II, the Holy Roman Emperor. This change to an interest in the musical arts may have

grealyt affected by the fact that music as a concept in itself became more prevalent as an art

form. Another possibility is that non-religious genres' rise in popularity drove this increase in

music-based patronage. As with any art, music eventually reached the height of its popularity, as

painting, sculpture, and other visual arts did in the Renaissance. In Renaissance Italy, music was

considered more of a church-based and lay-person's activity, sometimes coming to the attention

of patrons in the aristocracy but did not become a popular form of art until later (circa 17th

century).

As the world carried on farther into the modern age, patronage's shape changed to match

the times. What had originally been used to tout one's influence and wealth was used to shape

others' reputation and their own. Artists would often be asked to defame others for their patrons

in these cases, using their artistic aesthetic to do so.

One such case happened during the Nazi regime in the Third Reich of Germany. The Jewish people of Germany and abroad were among Hitler's prime targets during the supposed cleansing of the world that he sought. To gain the confidence of the people, he arranged some pieces of propaganda that would turn the public opinion of Jews sour. Notable among them was a children's book published in 1938 entitled *The Poisonous Mushroom* (*Der Giftpilz*) (Fig. 4). The book, written by Ernst Heimer and illustrated by Philipp Rupprecht, featured several chapters designed to teach children the dangers of the Jew and the importance in avoiding an association with them at all cost. The book depicts many situations that place the Jewish people into a villainous perspective, and it is odd to consider that a parent in Germany, or any place, would read this book to their children. The minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, did not like the book and is cited as saying that it is "terrible stuff" and questioning what Hitler saw in its potential (Bytwerk, German Propaganda Archive), showing that not all forms of propaganda were effective. However, effective or not, the fact that this kind of strategy being put in place shows that Nazi propagandists knew the power art could wield if used strategically. This became true of many political machines contemporary to this time. A cultural standing was not the end all of one's place in society.

One key change of patronage as it evolved into the modern era is that it became based around larger groups of people rather than singular people or organized entities acting as patrons. Indeed, this is one of the few true changes in patronage between the Renaissance and the modern day.

Fast-forward to today, to the age of the internet and instant gratification in entertainment. Still, there exists a demographic of artist and producer who do not have the means of making

their product in a self-sustained way. The technology exists at a reasonable price to make whatever product one may want, but the key is to expect a profit for the marketing of it. Art became, in the recent past, something an artist would use as "chips in a high-stakes cultural card game" (Siedell, Re-Imagining Patronage). In the Renaissance, artists would create only when they had a commission to complete. Otherwise, any work they did was only practice for future work, or a development of a technique.

The popularization of the internet has allowed any person with a computer connected to the internet to be capable of making connections with others literally across the world. This opened many opportunities for an artist to create works for pre-paying consumers. Artists, through this crowdfunding, have been able to return to the traditions of their spiritual ancestors of the Renaissance. In his article "Re-Thinking Patronage", Daniel Siedell puts it perfectly, saying "patronage can. . . . provide the freedom that allows an artist *not* to have to make work for an exhibition at her gallery for the sole purpose of generating sales" (Re-Thinking Patronage). A patron in the modern day fulfills the exact same duty they did centuries ago, giving support in return for a promised product from a producer.

The internet has provided several locations for this process, but two have taken hold in unique ways of providing similar services: Kickstarter.com and Patreon.com. Both are platforms dedicated to the creation of products with the monetary support of friends, family, and even complete strangers on the internet. The internet as a platform for a growing artist can be a hard medium to survive. It acts as a sieve, the larger artists getting trapped and lasting longer than those that fall through the cracks. A growing audience is cultivated by an artist knowing what the audience wants and a skill to achieve it. "Patronage," Siedell writes, "works to achieve an

audience over time" (Re-Imagining Patronage). To achieve this, what is needed is an ever-growing set of skills that will in turn reach and an ever-growing audience base. What is also required is a skill of social networking to bring in that audience. Patreon and Kickstarter have different ideas of what this means, specifically in that Kickstarter requires a community to exist behind a producer before a campaign is started and Patreon requires a growing audience to increase pledge amounts.

Kickstarter is a site that crowdfunds projects through backers opting-in to donate a volunteered amount toward a goal total to be met within a certain time limit. Opening in 2009, Kickstarter has been the platform through which "6 million people have pledged $1 billion, funding 59,000 projects" (What is Kickstarter?). These projects range in scope from book publication and filmmaking to beer brewing and fashion design. Some projects have goals of only a few thousand dollars, but end up raising much more than this, most likely given to the size of their online social communities backing them.

The Columbus State University Trombone Ensemble produced a CD in 2013 featuring several professional trombone soloists. After the completion of the recording and editing process, Kickstarter was the chosen platform for raising money to pay for the printing of the CDs from Summit Records. The raised money, if enough beyond the baseline goal was raised, would also go toward a commissioned piece for the Columbus State Trombone Ensemble. On March 6, 2013, the campaign ended with over 180% of the project's initial goal funded by one-hundred and four backers. Many other projects have been successful, some raising millions of dollars before their end. A failed campaign means that the artist receives no money and the backers get their money back. A campaign must meet or exceed the goal put in place for the artist/producer

to receive any funds. The "about" page on the site discusses the concept of a special feature deal

for patrons of a product. "Smaller patrons, often called subscribers," would be the receivers of

these special editions (Fig. 5) (Kickstarter, Inc., What is Kickstarter?). This includes special

editions of works featuring thanks to all of these subscribers, or additional items that only certain

levels of support receive. In the process of the CSU Trombone Ensemble campaign, all of the

people who donated above a certain amount were given the opportunity to allow their names to

be printed in the liner notes of the CD case. Other awards offered to patrons included posters

signed by the soloists and a score of the commissioned pieces mentioned above.

In an interview with Bradley Palmer, the ensemble's director and the editor for the CD,

he expresses his pleasure from the support of the community of musicians, friends, and family.

He also intimates that he did not expect the amount of money beyond the minimum margin he

set as the goal on Kickstarter. When asked about his decision to set the initial goal at $3,500, he

cited the balance between risk and reward. Setting a high goal would give the impetus to look

for more backers and grow a larger group of supporters. However, failing to reach that goal

would result in the campaign failing and no money going toward the project from Kickstarter.

Luckily, the community surrounding those involved in the project were willing to pay into the

campaign. A previously existing community is an important aspect of Kickstarter campaigns, as

there is most likely not enough time for a person in the middle of campaigning to build an entire

community of support.

Another platform, Patreon, seeks to give artists an opportunity for support, but in a

surprisingly different way than Kickstarter. Patreon works on a per-creation basis, giving

producers a promised amount every time they release something for their patrons. In a way, the

patrons, in this case, are acting as subscribers who pay as they get more product. This gives artists the impetus to create more and to get more skilled in order to draw in a bigger audience. This system is biased toward the creator who is going to create on a more regular basis, such as YouTubers, writers, podcasters, and photographers, but is a powerful tool for anyone with the skills to maintain an audience.

As with Kickstarter, producers often promise rewards for higher amounts of supports on a singular, personal basis. For musical creators on this site, this generally includes behind the scenes looks into how they create their products and also personal blog posts that give a deeper look into the processes of those they are choosing to support. This is very similar to what Kickstarter creators offer to their patrons, but on a longer timeline, as this is an ongoing process.

Patreon gives producers the ability to determine how they interact with their patrons, allowing the relationship between the two parties to be deeper than what Kickstarter is capable of doing through a potentially longer timeframe. Producers can offer personal interaction with their patrons, including blogs, video blogs, and process videos that show them in their creation process. For instance, a musical artist may want to reward their patrons with "thank you" videos where they will name each and every one of their new patrons. A musician could also have a live-streaming video of their recording or editing process, to show their skill in action. A behind the scenes look at how their products are made would also give their patrons a sense of what their money is going toward. Along those lines, producers are also encouraged to disclose to their patrons what their monetary goals for their Patreon campaign are. For instance, a producer would give a monetary amount of three-hundred dollars and say that they would put that toward the purchase of a new microphone, which would give him a better sound for his audience to

enjoy. Doing this gives a patron a feeling of ownership in the artist's products, that they contributed to the success of the artist, and may encourage them to support more artists in the future.

Patronage may be drastically different today than the form in which it started, but the same basic principle remains. Patrons still pay for products from producers, both benefitting mutually from the arrangement. In the Renaissance, a patron hiring an artist meant both that they were affluent enough to afford them and that culture was important, and an artist being hired meant that they were skilled enough for an aristocrat's notice. There were those who stood out, both as artists and as patrons, and this trend continues today. The Medici spent more than a century in Florence building up the culture of the city and their own influence through high-profile projects with high-profile artists in tow. Through the centuries after the Renaissance, patronage evolved into the system seen today, one based on a community of smaller backers and promises of reward for giving more rather than a singular entity like the Medici family or the Catholic Church. As the world continues to change, the patronage system has become supported by community and it is difficult to say how exactly it will continue to evolve as time wears on. In any case, the mere fact that there are those who still wish to produce is encouraging, and that there are those who wish to support them is even more so.

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Appendix

Figure 1.

Augustus of Prima Porta, Unknown, 2nd Century

Figure 2.
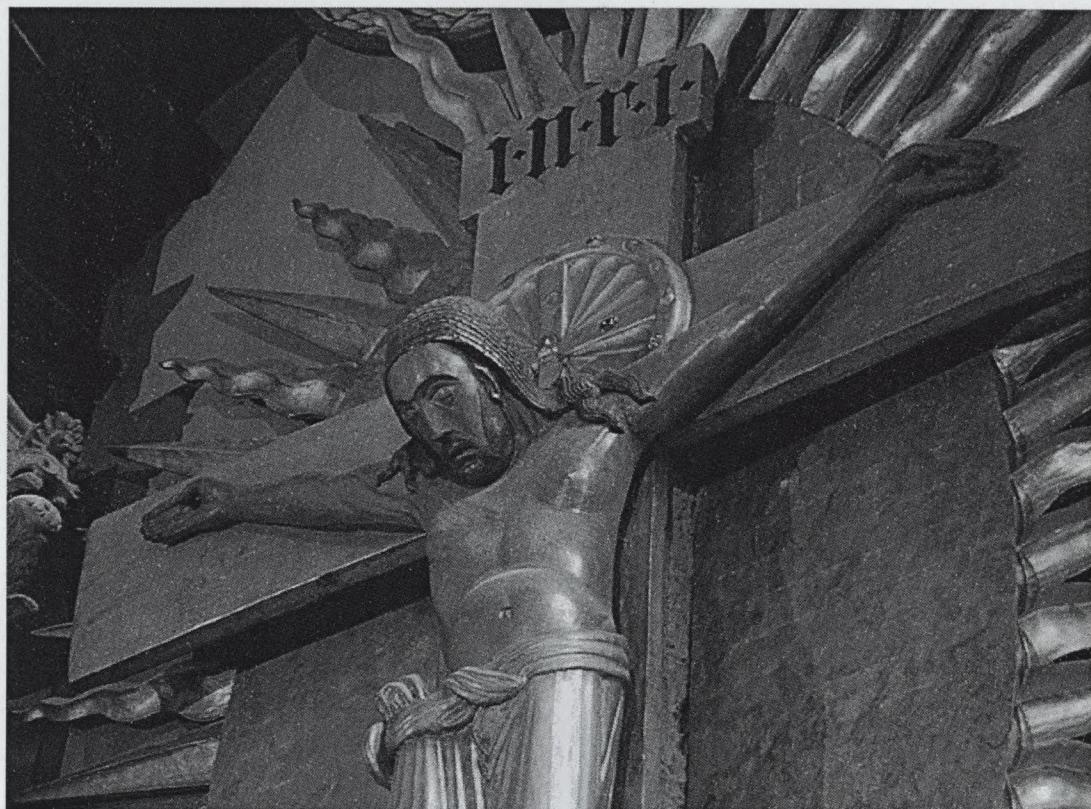
Gero Cross, Unknown (commissioned by: Gero, Archibishop of Cologne), 965-970

Figure 3.

David, Michelangelo, 1501-1504

Figure 4.
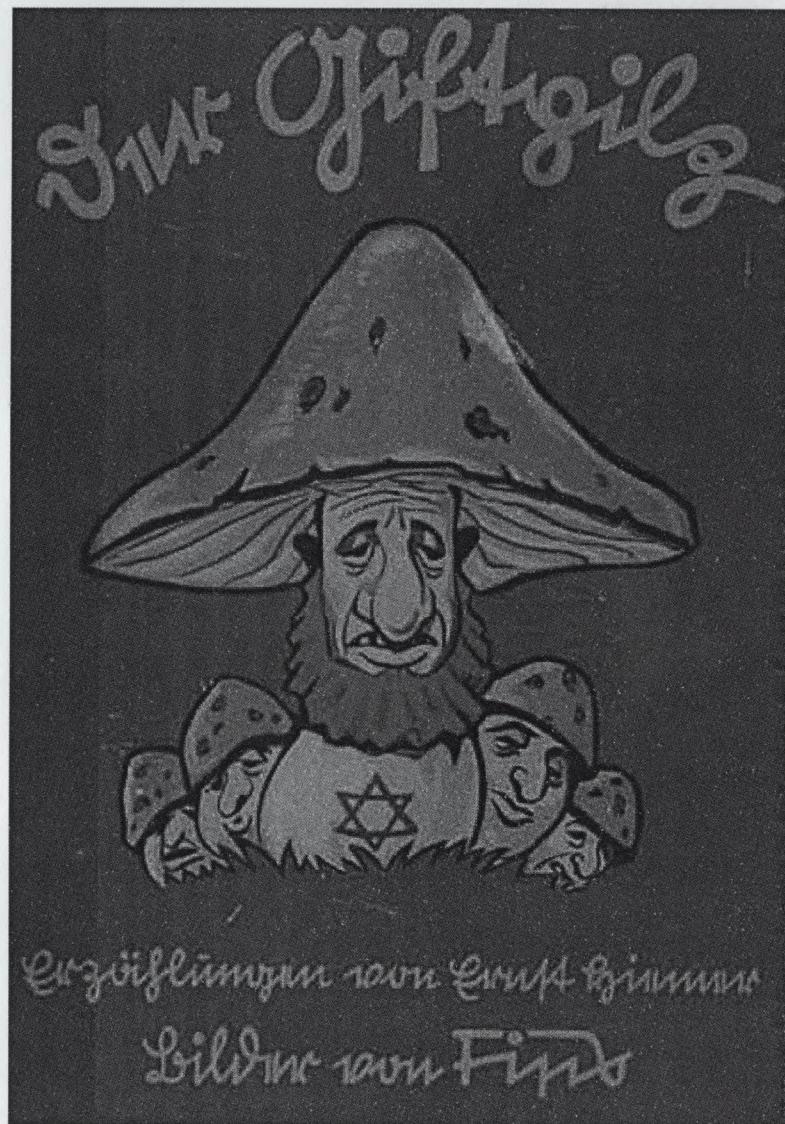
Der Giftpilz, Ernst Hiemer, 1938

Figure 5.

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